

# **The Clockwork Mouse**

**By**

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*Hickory, dickory, dock,  
the ghost lives in the clock.  
When the clock strikes five,  
for an hour alive,  
a mystery to unlock.*

The bay window facing Burnett Street filters afternoon light into the clock room. How beautiful the hated dust looks drifting through golden light.

"Dust, child." Spurgeon McAbe claps skeletal fingers together. "Don't stand there like a loon."

"Yes Grandfather." Grayce waves the duster like a magic wand. Glowing motes swirl dizzily about her, tickling her nose.

"Not the air, girl. The clocks." He raises his hands despairingly.

The waif-thin girl looks about the room with just as much despair in her heart. Every scrap of wall and bench is crowded with clocks. Clocks of all shapes and sizes. Wall clocks, mantle and

tabletop clocks, cuckoos with swinging pendulums and a grandfather clock, twice as tall as her. The polished wood calls dust with greater efficiency than the hissing gaslight on the street corner attracts moths at night.

"But Grandfather." Grayce hesitates. "It is almost closing time. They will need dusting again by morning."

"Lazy girl." Spurgeon stares at a portrait of a mousy young boy, behind the counter. Around his neck, the boy wears a chain that holds a ring.

"None to carry on the family legacy." The words are low and wistful, but they sting like a wasp.

Tears streak down Grayce's face as she dusts until every polished surface shines. No

customers enter before the *click-whir* of fifty clocks marks five o'clock. Bright feathered cuckoos bursts from their tiny doors to a chorus of chimes and raucous gongs.

Spurgeon latches the front door, hangs the closed sign and retreats into the back of the building.

Following him, Grayce enters the cluttered work room.

Grandfather hands her two slices of dark bread and points to the pot belly stove. He does not speak as he stalks out the back door.

Friday is tavern night.

Grayce opens the stove door and holds the bread over the coals. A feather-cold touch on the

side of her face makes her drop a slice into the stove. By the time she fishes it out one side is charred black and covered in ash.

"Oh, Perry." She doesn't expect a response, because ghosts can't speak, "You've ruined my supper."

The touch comes again, softer.

"I know you didn't mean it." She sits at the work bench, nibbling at the least burnt parts of the toast, and pulls an object from a pocket in her apron. "It's almost finished." She holds a tiny clockwork mouse on the palm of her hand.

Lamplight glints from shining brass and steel. "I just need to attach his legs and fit the right size cog so he can move his head."

Grayce's father died before she was born, her mother, on the birthing bed. Her six-year-old brother disappeared when she was three, leaving a grandfather who rarely spoke a kind word as her only family.

Perry had begun helping Grandfather in the workshop from the day of his fifth birthday. Yet, at eight, Grayce was only trusted with a broom or duster.

"It's not fair."

Her clockwork mouse is more intricate than any clock her grandfather ever created.

Grayce hunts through the discarded innards of old clocks in the tin scrap bucket. A spot of cold,

the size of a child's hand, touches her arm and the bookshelf rattles.

"I don't have time to read to you tonight."

She holds up the mouse again. "I told you, I'm almost finished."

A book tumbles from the shelf.

"Okay," she says. "But just one story."

Grayce picks up the cloth-bound book, *Pammelia: Mysicks Miscellanie*, by Thomas Ravencroft. It is open at a page with one very short verse.

She reads it.

*Jacke boy, ho boy newes,*

*The cat is in the well,*

*Let us ring now for her Knell,*

*Ding dong ding dong Bell.*

"Oh, Perry. That is a horrible poem."

Grayce thrusts the book away from her and turns back to the scrap bucket. She finds the right cog. It has a missing tooth but it should work. The tip of Grayce's tongue pokes from her mouth in concentration. She ignores the impatient touches of cold on her face and arms as she works. The half-hour chimes echo from the clock room as she attaches the last of the mouse's legs.

The final cog won't slide into place, catching on tiny brass collar bones. She pushes with the fine-tipped pliers.

*Click*

"Ouch!" A bead of Grayce's blood drops. It slides, glistening and red, into the clockwork innards.

The mouse burns cold in her hands. It wobbles for a moment then with a whirl of cogs, it stands and looks about the room.

"Perry?"

Brass ears twitch. It leaps to the floor and scampers for the rear door.

"Perry, wait."

It slips through a crack in the door and leads Grayce down cobbled lanes and up a winding path. She almost catches it as it darts beneath a vine-tangled iron gate.

"Oh, no!" Grayce looks at the creepy Merryweather mansion. The once proud house stands sinister and abandoned. Even the bravest street children refuse to pass this spot. "I'm not going in there, not at night."

The clockwork mouse impatiently taps his foot.

"If I die in there, I'll never forgive you." Grayce wriggles between the sharp wrought iron bars and follows the mouse through a tangled garden lit by slivers of silver moonlight.

The mouse stops at a weed choked hole in the ground.

Grayce kneels to look inside. It is deep and dank, thick with the stench of stagnant water.

"A well?" Cold tightens Grayce's chest.

The clockwork mouse dashes into the  
blackness.

Grayce kneels in the overgrown garden of a  
once beautiful house, its loss and desolation creep  
over her like mist. Her own loss fills her heart with  
ice.

When the mouse climbs out of the well, it is  
dragging a fine chain looped through a golden ring.

Perry's ring.